

Seeking Balance in a Continent Portrayed By Its Extremes

‘The patronizing reporting one witnesses today is as bad as the condescending work of the past.’

By Charles Onyango-Obbo

This story begins in the mid-1980’s, some months after President Yoweri Museveni’s rebels swept to power in Uganda in 1986. A visitor arrived at the offices of the *Weekly Topic*, a newspaper in Uganda where I then worked. The receptionist sent a note in that told me the name of the guest who wanted to see me: It was Mr. Mort Rosenblum. I was barely a year out of graduate school, and Rosenblum’s “Coups and Earthquakes” had enthralled me immensely. I could hardly believe the words I was seeing. I asked the receptionist to show him in.

I asked him whether he was *the* Rosenblum, and he said he was. He had stopped in Kampala on his way from the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. The annual summit of the continental body, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), now the African Union, had just ended in Addis Ababa, where it is headquartered. It was Museveni’s first summit as president, and he had knocked everyone off their feet.

Museveni had blasted the OAU for silence when the government he overthrew was murdering thousands of people in Uganda. He also told Africans to stop going around the world with bowl in hand begging, but get down to work by bringing reforms to their “backward” economies. This was something new in Africa: a young, educated, confident, victorious guerrilla ready to tick off other presidents openly, to acknowledge that Africa was a mess, and the world didn’t owe the continent a

living—and that we, Africa, could no longer continue blaming colonialists for its problems. Rosenblum found the performance refreshing, a ray of hope, and had come to see for himself if Museveni was just shooting his mouth off or if indeed he was doing at home as he was preaching in Addis Ababa.

This happened several years before apartheid ended in South Africa and Nelson Mandela became a worldwide symbol of hope, so everyone was groping for an African icon. The emergence of Museveni was the new black hope that the international media had been looking for in Africa. Shortly after Addis Ababa, Western media began to describe him as a “new breed of African leader.”

What many Western correspondents hoped they could do was ‘nanny’ the African story so that what they reported could become self-fulfilling prophecies.

During the next eight years several supposedly more enlightened guerrilla leaders came to power: Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia, Issayas Afewerki in Eritrea, Paul Kagame in Rwanda and, briefly, Laurent Kabila in Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This new breed of leaders now became a “club,” and Western media trumpeted the arrival of a new era in African politics even though there was no wave of African enlightenment sweeping the continent, as these leaders were a tiny minority.

Those who held the view of presenting a “more balanced” coverage of Afri-

ca—stories playing down the failures in the continent—won the argument. Not all Western media changed, but those who did seemed, in part, to be driven by guilt. They became very apologetic. Thus, in Rwanda, the international press was reluctant to cover killings in 1996 that local people blamed on the victorious Rwandan Patriotic Front. Reluctance to do so was related to memories of the world’s failure two years earlier to do enough to halt the genocide that took place in this central African country. And in Uganda, coverage of AIDS has been clouded by the Western media’s general fear of questioning some of the reports about the dramatic fall in the rate of infection.

These tendencies surfaced in reporting around the same time that old hard-nosed Africa hands like the Los Angeles Times’s David Lamb were being replaced by younger report-

ers, who were arriving at their assignments with progressive views about the Third World. In their coverage, these Western correspondents supported causes like debt write-offs and wrote in angered tones about the West’s failure to do anything to stop the 1994 genocide in Rwanda in which an estimated 800,000 people were butchered.

A new development then conspired to further distort Western media reporting on Africa. In the past, rebellions used to drag on forever in Africa. A foreign correspondent would cover it for about five years, then move on

to Asia or the Middle East to sample other conflicts. Now victorious insurgents were walking into capitals much sooner—between one to five years from when they took to the bush to fight the government. This meant that a foreign correspondent could cover the conflict from the outbreak of the rebellion to the seizure of power by these dissidents in one relatively short assignment. The result: Correspondents established a bond with the rebels and then continued to cover them in their first years in government. While some were still able to see shortcomings in those who now governed, most found that the cause of these new leaders became partly theirs, and many correspondents spoke about the need to cover these countries with greater “understanding.”

This approach led to these favored African governments becoming sacred. For example, these leaders enjoyed a level of immunity that British reporters would never give their own government. I confronted a dramatic example of this at the height of the enthusiasm for the “new Africa” in the mid-1990’s. An influential British newspaper came to Uganda to do a long special report about the “economic miracle.” The country was being called the “star pupil” of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund—the “African success story.” Before this team of reporters flew out, perhaps worried their reporting glorified the government too much, they decided to get some critical quotes to bring a little balance to the copy. The journalists came to interview me and asked whether I thought Uganda had put its political nightmares behind it.

I said no. Corruption, I told them, was creeping back. I also thought that the political restrictions that made the country a one-party state were not justified because a nation can only become a democracy by practicing this form of government. I told them there was a need to find a political solution to the rebellion the Museveni government was facing in the northern part of Uganda.

In the 12 full newspaper pages of this special report, my comments were the only critical ones. Even so, the paper still found it necessary to qualify them by referring to me as “editor of the

Africa Web Coverage

Among the strongest Web sites displaying the complexities of the continent and her news are South Africa’s News24.co.za and Africamediaonline.com. There is a relatively new and ambitious site, Africaalmanac.com, which is a fact-filled destination for those in a hurry, along with world-class coverage on Africana.com and Africa IPLC.com. Also available are news and commentary about Africa on Western media Web sites including BBC.com, CNN.com, Alertnet.org, and the Washington, D.C.-based AllAfrica.com, which has specialized in reporting on the continent for more than a decade. ■ —COO

opposition Monitor newspaper.” The Monitor was then owned by the journalists who worked for it and was the most independent newspaper ever published in Uganda. However, it was clear that the point of the article’s characterization of me was done to undermine the criticism of the government. It struck me that an American or British newspaper almost never referred to a newspaper as an “opposition” publication simply because it was critical of the Clinton or Blair governments.

Can Balance Be Restored?

It was in this environment that in May 2000 The Economist published a map of Africa on its cover with the headline, “The Hopeless Continent.” Across Africa, a collective sigh of horror was heard, illustrated best by words Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo wrote for New Internationalist: “What, one wonders, is the source of such malediction? What compels some editor in London or New York to characterize a whole continent of nearly 700 million people, and all of its 300,175,000 square kilometers as ‘hopeless’? What have Africans done to deserve such absolute hexing? ... We suspect that The Economist has got a really dark and sinister aim. Clearly, as our masters’ voice, one of its agendas is to make sure that Africans do not regain any of the self-confidence they may have lost from the ‘Dark Continent’ label.”

At a World Economic Forum summit in Durban, South Africa, I heard South Africa’s president, Thabo Mbeki, make similar criticism of The Economist, though in less strong language. Several speakers agreed. If The Economist had carried that cover in 1989, it wouldn’t have caused a storm. By then, the expectation of “positive” coverage hadn’t become so settled in Africa.

Just as The Economist got its tone (as opposed to the basic reporting) wrong, so have the flood of “miracle” stories on Africa been misleading. Nearly all the members of the “new breed” of African leaders club have blown it. They made some political steps by holding elections, but in neither Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda nor Mozambique have there been free elections that would meet internationally accepted standards. These countries are still largely one party states. Ethiopia and Eritrea fought a bitter border war, and the latter has slid back into a Stalinist state without a free press and where there is no freedom of religious worship. Uganda and Rwanda became embroiled in a war in the DRC, which degenerated in plunder and resulted either directly or indirectly in the death of about 2.5 million people, according to the United Nations.

Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe, who in the early 1990’s often was included among the “new breed” of leaders, has turned into a brutal dictator who has bankrupted what was once one of Africa’s most prosperous nations. Pro-government goons are deployed now to break up opposition rallies with axes. The World Bank and the Economic Commission for Africa finally agree that, in spite of all the stories of economic miracles and the African “economic cubs” (the name coined for Africa’s fast growing economies like Uganda, Rwanda and Mozambique), the continent is poorer today than it was 25 years ago. The external debt of countries whose economies were being touted as a model has grown worse, and debt relief initiatives have not helped.

One might ask why, if all was going so well, the situation in Africa is what it is today. In part, some blame must rest with those who project Africa to the world even when they have lost

the ability to cover it accurately. What many Western correspondents hoped they could do was “nanny” the African story so that what they reported could become self-fulfilling prophecies. As this was happening, the leadership in Africa became not only complacent, but also used the flattering international coverage to muzzle internal critics and vigorous independent reporting by labelling it as the work of “disgruntled elements” who were out to make mischief and not willing to acknowledge the good about the government that “all the world sees.” And so the cycle went. Governments that might have been motivated to do well, in part, to stem bad press that might cost them donor aid, expected—and received—instead a forgiving understanding of Africa’s peculiarities from international media. And there was more than enough Western guilt to ensure that the understanding was offered.

In those years, when governments were still struggling to establish their domestic and international acceptance, opportunities existed when they would have been more likely to respond to reporting about their shortcomings and achievements they needed to build on. Once established, they are less responsive. If Western reporting of Africa used to drip with comical and tragic stereotypes, the bulk of the reporting today is condescending coverage that tends to treat the citizens of the continent as children who can’t take a rebuke and need to be bribed with sweet words.

If Western media coverage of Africa failed in decades past because of being steeped in a cynical and, some argue, racist tradition, then today’s “improved” version fails because it also is not a balanced portrayal. Africa, the continent, is a collection of nations that are pretty much like others elsewhere in the world, struggling with successes

and with failures, and there should be no special type of journalism reserved for its coverage. The patronizing reporting one witnesses today is as bad as the condescending work of the past. What the African continent needs is good journalism, one that tells the stories as they are reported and observed. What has happened to coverage of Africa in the Western media today offers the latest proof that there is no alternative to this proven approach. ■

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Trapped in a Time-Warped Narrative

A BBC foreign correspondent pleads with journalists to move past their relentless focus on Africa’s misery.

By Fergal Keane

During apartheid’s 1986 declared state of emergency, when I was a neophyte foreign correspondent sneaking in and out of South Africa undercover to report for the BBC, I came across a beautiful saying. One afternoon I went to interview a group of children who had been tortured by the security police. All were badly bruised; some had cuts on their backs where they’d been whipped; one child’s leg was stippled with shotgun pellets.

Across Soweto the police were rounding up anybody they suspected of being involved in antiapartheid protests. A lawyer had been appointed to take statements from the children. Hers was a risky job since lawyers weren’t immune from state terror. After recording the children’s stories, I asked this

woman why she risked her own freedom to do this. “We have an expression here,” she told me. “People are people because of other people. It means we are connected. We must look out for each other.”

In two decades of reporting from Africa, I’ve witnessed living proof of this proverb often. From the toughest refugee camp in the deserts of Sudan to the bustling streets of the Johannesburg townships, I’ve been relentlessly overwhelmed by displays of humanity, compassion and generosity.

The Two Stories of Africa

The problem is I don’t see much of this on television. There are exceptions, such as good segments that CNN has

produced and the program, “Africa Direct,” which BBC World aired until recently. But usually the Africa of the international camera is a continent of just two stories. In the first, smiling Africans in white jackets serve ice cold drinks to Western tourists at safari lodges. This is the Africa of spectacular wildlife, wonderful sunsets, and genial locals, seen through windows of air-conditioned minibuses. The Africa in which the majority of Africans live is kept at a safe distance, or glimpsed, again through bus windows, on one of those newly popular “township tours.”

The other predominant vision is the disaster zone or, in the cliché most favored by distant headline writers who coin phrases about Africa, it is about “the Heart of Darkness.” In this continent